

## A JOKE WITH THE INEVITABLE

MEN AS WOMEN AND WOMEN AS MEN IN ARISTOPHANES'

THESMOPHORIAZOUSAI AND EKKLESIAZOUSAI

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It is not only the jokes in the *Thesmophoria* and the *Ekklesiazousai*, but the whole framework of the gender transgressions which are comic. If the plot of the *Thesmophoriazousai* had taken place in reality, however, it would not have been amusing at all, but a matter of life and death. For a man to have attended the secret mystery rites at the Thesmophoria would have offended against the religious and the civic laws of Classical Athens. The procedure related to grave offences, or at least a glimpse of it, is described in the text. Cleisthenes the effeminate is sent to report the crime to the Council, and it is certain that the conclusion to such an enterprise would have been death, as Mnesilochus himself is aware when he is standing tied to the column, hoping that Euripides will rescue him.

### *The Thesmophoriazousai and the Thesmophoria*

The plot of Aristophanes' comedy, *Thesmophoriazousai* (The Poet and the Women), takes place during one particular day in the three-day-long festival of Demeter Thesmophoros, the Thesmophoria. In the comic plot, Aristophanes makes the women of Athens decide upon the death penalty for the tragic playwright Euripides, because he has slandered them in his plays. In order to avoid the death penalty, Euripides must find a man who, in disguise, can go to the Thesmophoria to defend him. Euripides, being one of the most famous tragic poets in Athens, has an understandable fear that he, however well disguised, would be recognised if he attempted to enter the holy site himself. So off he seeks out another tragic poet, Agathon, who is a well known crossdresser and effeminate. Agathon, however, refuses to take part in the plan; he also claims that he is too well known to risk of such an enterprise. In the end, Euripides persuades an old

friend and relation, Mnesilochus, to enter the holy site disguised as a woman in order to defend him. The disguised man is detected and held captive, while Cleisthenes, another effeminate, who happens to pass by, runs to the Council to report the crime. So far the comedy conveys normal, lawful procedures concerning the discovery of a serious sacrilege, the fact underlined by poor Mnesilochus lamenting that his life should end in such a way. The comedy, however, ends differently. It concludes with the women and Euripides coming to terms; the women, then, withdraw the death penalty, and Euripides promises never to slander them again.

If the plot of the *Thesmophoriazousai* had taken place in real life, however, it would have been a matter of life and death. According to the laws, the proceedings against a person guilty of severe sacrilege were the concern of not only the strictly religious magistrates and laws, but also of the Council and the Assembly. The Assembly suggested a punishment appropriate to the offence, and we learn from several cases that impiety and sacrilege of various kinds were severely punished. We need only recall one of the most famous heretic-cases in Athens, when Sokrates was condemned to death.

The presence of a man at the Thesmophoria would not only have been a source of pollution, which would have affected the efficacy of its purpose: the promotion of fertility, but also would have been a direct offence against Demeter's mystery rites. The Greeks knew stories about men, who, by offending the twain goddesses, Demeter and her daughter Kore, were punished severely. From Herodotus we learn of Miltiades who was punished directly by the two goddesses when he entered their holy site in Paros. Miltiades held Paros in siege, but had no further luck with the enterprise. A priestess of subordinate rank to the earth goddess sought an interview with him. This she obtained and she suggested to Miltiades that, if he really wanted to capture Paros, he had better do as she advised (Hdt.6, 134). Exactly what these suggestions were, we are not told, but they included Miltiades' entering the holy site of Demeter Thesmophoros. Since it was impossible to go beyond the entrance door, he entered the site by jumping over the fence. When he reached the temple, he was suddenly struck by such fear, that he ran away in panic breaking his leg in the process. Later he died of gangrene from the injury to his leg, and the whole army had to relinquish the siege and leave Paros.

Another story tells us of king Battus of Cyrene who wanted to learn about the mysteries of the Thesmophoria. The priestesses tried to resist, but the king would not to be stopped. The women, however, forbade the king to watch what was forbidden for a man to see and hear, but the priestesses did allow him to watch the first part of the

ceremonies which contained nothing out of the ordinary. The priestesses continued with their ceremony, clothed in their holy garments, and wholly possessed because of their initiation into the mysteries. They brandished their naked swords, and sacrificed animals, their hands and faces stained with blood. Then they suddenly halted, as if in response to a hidden signal, leaped upon Battus and removed the part of him that made him a male. No *man* should watch the forbidden. (Suid. *Thesmophoros*.)

The stories about these unfortunate men might be dubious and not all together correct in a strict historical sense. The narratives are, however, highly important as historical sources, because folk stories are true in the sense of revealing sentiment and mentality regarding certain matters: for the people themselves, such stories are thus thought to be correct historical narratives. The narratives about these unfortunate men supported and emphasised the law prohibiting the participation of men. By showing the gruesome consequences of transgression, both the narratives and law protected the mystery rites. Although we have no exact court documents about sacrilege against the Thesmophoria, the pious reactions concerning activities understood as grave offences, can be shown clearly from the case of Socrates.

Why is it then, if such activities were forbidden and had deadly consequences, we find a comedy making jokes about the holy, and highly protected festival of the Thesmophoria? On one level, the purpose of the humor in this comedy is as follows: the plot is the author's trick to put a man in the Thesmophoria in order to make a joke with *the inevitable*. The concept needs some explanation. It is an inevitable fact that every society, in order to *be* a society, must conform to certain basic ideas about right and wrong, from which in turn norm, legislated law and ordered structure develop and get established. In a religious world, society as a whole and the individual being are both confined to a double set of boundaries. Since the values and order of the world are believed to have been initiated through the act of divine creation, the political culture carries out what is believed to be divine sentiments and commandments in its secular institutions, law, stratifications, and allotted responsibilities. In addition, religious law proper manifests itself in dogmas and particular religious practices taking place in marked out sites, buildings and on festival days, altogether regarded as holy. In a well-functioning society such basic ideas are understood as values to be kept and protected. Not only is confinement to basic ideas inevitable on a general level, but certain ideas or norms are thought to be inevitable in themselves in order to achieve ongoing bliss, and avoid outbursts of political chaos.

This is not to say that belief and political approval go without friction. Society, groups within it and the individual, encounter opposite and conflicting loyalties and interests, between themselves and from pressure from beyond, juxtaposed with individual desires and goals. Legislative programs can control conflicts but not necessarily extinguish them altogether. An additional pressure in a religious world is the strict divine law. However blissful, the thought of eternal, celestial monitoring, eternal dogmas and divine order are believed to be definite and absolute. The divine operates with a logic of its own, not always easily intelligible to the human being. It is, among other things, a divine prerogative to establish relations and institutions by commanding a particular group to follow or carry out a god's demand. The superiority held by such a group, with the following comparative subordination of another, or even the rest of society, may be understood as context bound, but, nevertheless, unquestionable and fixed. Hence, in addition to secular stratification, religion itself may create opposing groups.

Thus glued together, society represents structure and norm that are not only inevitable but cherished, and in particular marked out contexts also worshipped. On the other hand, obedience and submission, however necessary, create friction. Several societies, as Max Gluckman's theory goes, in order to avoid real rebellion, acknowledge perpetual friction and make a public display of it on festival days created especially for this purpose. Some societies even go to the extreme of *creating* conflict as a public tableau in order to prevent future problems of that kind. On such festival days, opposing groups exchange status, the younger command the elder, excluded groups are permitted entrance to forbidden areas, and so on. By making a topsy-turvy picture of normality, normality in fact becomes emphasised. Such festivals can be highly dramatic, but also full of teasing and jesting. Their purpose seems to be clear: by combining emphasis of normal order with an element of rebellion, the participants offer a tribute to their norms and structure, while at the same time there is an easing off of friction. The topsy-turvy, however, is strictly confined to its acknowledged time and place. In ordinary life the behaviour that is licenced in these festivals, would necessitate capital punishment.

How does all this fit with the Greeks and the Aristophanic comedies? In the polytheistic religion of the Greeks, two godheads in particular, Dionysos and Demeter, singled out women for special purposes, of which those of Demeter are of special interest for us now.

Since everything concerning Demeter was encompassed with the *unspeakable*, it is difficult to see exactly how and why she chose women exclusively to perform some of her mystery rites (see the Homeric Hymn *To Demeter*, 2.76 ff.) But she did, and thereby must have been the originator of the festival of the Thesmophoria, and we learned from the stories above the gruesome consequences which befell men who attempted to trespass. From what has been discussed above, we may understand the joke with the inevitable in the comedy *Thesmophoriazousai* as follows: the inevitable here is the fact that the whole citizen body of Athens was dependent upon the women to celebrate the rite which allowed Demeter to perform her annual miracle: the fertility of the crops and the blessing of female fecundity. In fact, the whole idea of making a comedy of the holy Thesmophoria is a joke with the inevitable, disguised men or not. To fully understand humor in general and Aristophanes' comedies in particular, I think it will be convenient to define what I call *licence in jokes*. Licence in jokes involves the licence to touch upon subjects normally treated with respect and piety. It is by this licence that humour can penetrate into spheres which in the real world would have been taboo. This is an aspect of humour which offers relief. In the framework of a joke, one can rebel against what are normally thought to be axiomatic truths: the inevitable. Thus, the joke will, in a reversed manner, also express respect. The joke expresses both a rebellion against, and a tribute to, the norm it trespasses.

The Thesmophoria was an exclusively female responsibility, and one of the most ancient and widespread festivals in antiquity. It performed what seems customarily to have been connected with Demeter, namely her secret mystery rites. In fact, I am not sure if we can regard these rites as secrets in the strict sense of the word since they were disclosed to the entire body of mature Athenian women. (It would appear that virgins did not attend this festival). Since the Thesmophoria were the concern of exclusively female citizens in common with some other festivals and rituals, I regard these festivals as female *property*. They were kept and maintained as most private property in antiquity; those who did not belong had no right to interfere or have knowledge of it. Because of this, and maybe also because of the original agreement between Demeter and women, the women kept the rites of the Thesmophoria to themselves, even though the rites were held for the benefit of all. In his comedy Aristophanes does not display any of the mystery rituals because he most probably knew nothing about them. Even if he had, he would have had to



submit to the prohibitions concerning display or communications about Demeter's mysteries. It is for this reason that Herodotus does not tell us what the priestess suggested to Miltiades, just that it had something to do with Demeter, and thereby her mysteries. Thus, in the comedy Aristophanes is making jokes about the *existence* of the festival and some of the *ceremonies* which were not concealed. Here we also can recall the story about king Battus who was permitted to watch that which contained nothing out of the ordinary.

The difference between ceremony and ritual might be defined as follows; a ritual is a holy channel in which human beings and the god can meet in an intimate way. A ritual is characterised by being an *agreement* between the god and the humans about how the channel should function. This agreement is originally thought to have been initiated and established by the god, as the Christian communion was originally initiated by Christ at the Last Supper. Humans are not supposed to initiate rituals themselves since miracles are entirely in the hands of gods. Ceremonies on the other hand, religious or not, are human inventions. Those who are allowed to participate in rituals will in some instances belong to a different category from those who cannot. My point is that half the population of those who were citizens of Athens had access to the secret rituals. Thus, the women of Athens were in possession of a remarkable property; the knowledge and ability to open and re-open the holy channel which connected Athens to Demeter and her fertility miracles. To offend this holy channel would have been to offend an inevitable norm in Classical Athens. Obviously any interference would have been punished severely.

Since the Thesmophoria was one of the most important festivals in Athens owing to its potential influence, this brings us to another joke with the inevitable and the licence of jokes to rebel against what are thought to be axiomatic structures, in this case the female status and power to participate in the holy channel. In a common picture of Classical Athens males and females are described as separate groups who almost never interact. The lack of female interaction in the male sphere of prestige has been treated as a kind of aching tooth in this democratic society, urging scholars to look for clues and evidence that feminist thoughts existed in Classical Athens. Very often this search has been focused upon Aristophanes' "female-plays" in order to find evidence for feminism because of the outstanding female figures in these plays.

It is my understanding of Aristophanes that his errand was not to provoke debate but that he, and other comic playwrights, had the *duty*

to offer opportunities in the annual, *institutionalised* festival for both rebelling and giving tribute to the structures and norms of Athens. We must, after all, recall the context in which Attic dramas were performed, the procedures connected to the drama contests, and the Athenian constitution. This leads us to the other comedy in question, the *Ekklesiazousai* (Assembly women).

### ***The Ekklesiazousai***

In the comic plot of the *Ekklesiazousai* the women of Athens perform a formidable *coup d'état*. Disguised as men they enter the Assembly (Ekklesia) and there, since they outnumber the men, by democratic procedure they establish a new political structure. The new order involves a sexual liberty hitherto unknown, for the women in particular. In addition, all ownership of property is abandoned and property and goods are shared equally. The comedy concludes that everybody lived happily ever after in the new established order.

This comedy displays a reversal of normality. It was never the intention of Athenian democracy that everyone should have an equal share of property. This is one of the contrasts between ancient and modern democracies. The latter were born out of the humanistic philosophy as it developed from the 18th century on and emphasised equality of birth; because of this, people were taught to struggle for economic equality in addition to universal suffrage so that everybody should be given an opportunity to influence the composition of the government. The contrary was true in the ancient democracy, no one questioned inequality of birth. Demand for economic equality and universal right to vote were never expressed in the democracy of Athens. Government in the sense of parliamentarism or particularly elected members for the purpose to govern, did not exist. The participation in the Assembly was direct, and given to all mature men, however, only those of Athenian stock. The paramount political value in the democracy of Athens was that one should be given an equal chance to participate in public life with an equal share of duty. The proposed society in this comedy is a total reversal of this fundamental idea. I do not believe that this comedy is either a pre-Marxist dream or that it expresses a real suggestion for changing the structure of Athenian democracy. The one-year period of the thirty tyrants and the re-establishment of democracy was recent history. The time was very well suited for a joking tribute to the beloved democratic institutions of Athens.

The women in this comedy appear uncertain about the procedures held in the Assembly as the men about the rites in the Thesmophoria.

The heroine Praxagora becomes the natural leader of the plot since she has been able to watch the procedures when she and her husband previously lived close to the Pnyx. This is why she knows what to do and what to say: men were apparently not supposed to tell their wives about the procedures or the agenda, or the decisions that were taken. This is also emphasised in the conversation between Blepyrus and Chremes. Again we can see the separate spheres of responsibilities (Arist. *Ekk.* 465ff.).

In both comedies manhood is emphasised by men's body-hair, while the effeminate are pictured shaven with a smooth complexion. In both comedies womanhood is emphasised by the *absence* of body-hair, which the Athenian women removed from arm-pits, arms, legs and also crutch by singeing themselves with oil lamps. Mnesilochus is thus both shaven *and* singed to attain the hairless skin proper for Athenian women before he enters the holy site. In the *Ekklesiiazousai* the women have let their arm-pit hair grow in order not to be detected as women in the customary raising of the arm when taking the oath which opens the Assembly. In addition they have stayed out in the sun in order to ruin their fair skin and of course they are wearing false beards. The two sexes are separated not only in responsibilities, but also in every detail concerning outfit and appearance.

### ***The significance of gender transgression in the two comedies***

What is then the significance of the gender transgressions of the comedies in question? In both comedies the main purpose of the gender transgressions seems to be a more profound reversal than just a reversal of the gender roles. This level is reached through the sexes operating in places and situations normally closed to them. They are the channels through which Aristophanes takes the whole audience into a joking rebellion and tribute.

The types of jokes reveal what the basic structures of Athenian society were: the worship of the gods, the democratic ideas and the responsibilities held by each gender. Very often the religious realm is not included in what most people think of as a public, political sphere of prestige since comparisons are too easily made to modern secularised societies where religion is something apart and belongs to the realm of private feelings. In Classical Athens some aspects of life were included in the public sphere, others were conducted apart and belonged to the private sphere, as did some of the religious festivals concerning only a part of the population. The other religious



festivals, like the Thesmophoria, were State festivals because they were held for the benefit of the whole population. The State was responsible for their performance and, therefore, these festivals were included in the State religious calendar. This is significant because *it includes the female citizens in the public maintenance of the State*. The joke in the *Thesmophoriazousai* is a joke with the inevitable; the dependency of society on Demeter and the status of women as Demeter's attendants. In this case the status of females is superior to that of men. The comedy includes men's joking rebellion against this fact, but also their tribute. The reverse seems to be the point in the *Ekklesiazousai*.

It seems to be taken for granted by both feminists and non-feminists that due to their presumed universal inferiority women need to rebel against men from time to time. That men should need the same kind of rebellion against women is either regarded as unbelievable or as male chauvinism. But in a society where power and superiority is connected with areas monopolised by one or other gender and allotted on a more or less equal basis, *men as well as women need to rebel*, thus establishing a joking relationship. Thus, males and females in Classical Athens emerge as two significant groups, holding different kinds of property and responsibility, distinguished also as different, both in appearance and behaviour, non-competitors in one another's arena, not bothered with too much interaction but co-operating on a higher level, the maintenance of the State, that is. I think we can regard gender as being in a way very like guilds, in the way of operating with specific laws and rules, fields of operation, monopolies in work and the like, thereby also developing a specific cultural code and aims in each gender sphere. This seems to be the very social structure of pre-industrial societies, both past and present, as for example in several contemporary African societies. In the African examples the gender structure reveals itself among other things most clearly in connection with boys' and girls' puberty rites, where the novices in the beginning of the rite are surrounded by each gender group, taunting and teasing the other. Victor Turner reports that prior to the young boys' circumcision, manhood is emphasised by the men performing this rite *alone* and far from where the mothers are waiting. They are also in *opposition* to the mothers. The rite contains actions symbolising behaviour and activities for men only, as the women, in the girls' puberty rites, emphasise female prerogatives. This emphasis on gender prerogatives is clear in many of the written texts

from Classical Athens, and in the “female plays” of Aristophanes above all.

This brings us to some other characters, the effeminates. They have their own significance in the comedies in question. Cleisthenes and Agathon are never *disguised* as women like poor Mnesilochus. While Mnesilochus must *pretend* all the way, Cleisthenes and Agathon do not need to. Cleisthenes has a permanent resemblance to a woman, his sympathies are always with the women. His reception at the Thesmophorion is seen as something quite natural; the leader almost excuses herself for not being permitted to reveal the secret rites to him when she questions Mnesilochus about them. The case of Agathon, on the other hand, is not so clear cut. Due to his occupation as a tragic poet, he switches from male to female according to the figures he pictures in his tragedies. His gender transgression seems to be a permanent toing and froing. He seems to be both, and maybe neither, since one never knows what appearance he will display next. The confusion surrounding him puzzles also Mnesilochus in Agathon’s house: “Tell me, why this perturbation of nature? A lute, a yellow gown? A lyre and a hair-net, a woman’s girdle and a wrestler’s oil flask? A sword and a hand-mirror? It doesn’t make sense. What are you — a man? Then where’s your cloak? Where are your shoes? And what have you done with your tool? But if you’re a woman, what’s happened to your bosom? Well, speak up! If you won’t tell me, I shall have to judge by your singing!” (Arist. *Thesm.* 101-67).

The role of the effeminates in the comedy is never to play a role of reversal, as the character Mnesilochus. Agathon and Cleisthenes are historical persons ridiculed by Aristophanes for their effeminacy in *real* life. It appears to have been a comic convention, or at least an aspect of the licence in comedy, to ridicule living persons present in the theatre. Agathon and Cleisthenes are ridiculed in *earnest*, while Mnesilochus is a comic figure only: a tool to make a joke with the inevitable. Even if he had been a historical person, he is, nevertheless, given the function of a masculine man who finds it repulsive to dress as a woman. This underlines his comic function in the comedy. He is cross-dressing only, as the comedy goes, to help Euripides in his desperate situation. The scene is almost heart-tearing for all its comic situation: when detected and held a captive, he grieves that he must face his speedily forthcoming death singed and dressed as a woman.

Agathon and Cleisthenes are never portrayed *disguised* as women in the *Thesmophoriazousai* like poor Mnesilochus. By natural inclination, they *love* to dress as women, and as such they are

displayed, exaggeratedly perhaps, but one of their functions in the comedy is also to be a contrast to Mnesilochus. Mnesilochus, and the women in the *Ekklesiazousai*, serve as roles of reversal to make the comic transgression into the respective forbidden areas. In the real world Agathon and Cleisthenes transgress the normal code of men. In the comedy, however, Cleisthenes in particular is portrayed as so feminine that he is almost received as a woman at the Thesmophoria. This is the uttermost of ridicule: put in a comedy about gender transgression, Cleisthenes is not transgressing! And thereby he is the real transgressor: the one who crosses boundaries in real life that, according to masculine standard, should not have been crossed at all.

The *Thesmophoriazousai*, and the *Ekklesiazousai* alike, must have been hilariously funny according to Athenian standard. The type of jokes in these comedies depend upon a clear understanding of a significant difference between a masculine and feminine world, between men and women's clothing, behaviour and field of operation. As mentioned above, one of the features of the mature man in Athens was his beard. Only ephebes, young men not yet full citizens, and effeminate, seem to have walked about without beards. Women, on the other hand, went to the effort of singeing their bodies to distinguish themselves from men. Nor do the comedies shrink from making jokes about diverging sexual inclinations. In our modern societies this has been made almost impossible, from political correctness, and from equality programs. The only part left might be men dressed as women, and even that is doubtful since fashion among young men in particular is very often effeminate. It is not funny to dress up women as men in comedy when women nowadays constantly appear in this sort of gender transgression and when men and women operate in the same fields as in Norway where men work as nurses and in kindergardens and where women are high ranking politicians or work as bank-directors and carpenters. When the men and women in the Aristophanes' comedies operate in the opposite field, they have to disguise themselves, if not they would have no entrance at all.

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